

Sofia Cutler, "Review of 'Radical Gotham: Anarchism in New York City from Schwab's Saloon to Occupy Wall Street', edited by Tom Goyens (University of Illinois Press)," *Lateral* 7.1 (2018).

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Book Reviews

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Review of *Radical Gotham: Anarchism in New York City from Schwab's Saloon to Occupy Wall Street*, edited by Tom Goyens (University of Illinois Press)

Sofia Cutler

ABSTRACT Radical Gotham tracks anarchist life and politics in New York City over the last hundred and fifty years, giving a vivid window into an anarchist New York buzzing with saloons, assembly halls, and publishing houses. This anthology asserts anarchism's endurance as both an idea and a movement as it develops from the working-class, immigrant anarchist communities in the late 19th century into the New Left in the 1950s and 60s and finally the recent Occupy Wall Street protests.

Radical Gotham: Anarchism in New York City from Schwab's Saloon to Occupy Wall Street, edited by Tom Goyens Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017, 270 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978 0 252 08254 2. US List: \$28.00.

Radical Gotham: Anarchism in New York City from Schwab's Saloon to Occupy Wall Street tracks anarchist life and politics in New York City over the last one hundred fifty years. The anthology of essays is a vivid window into an anarchist New York buzzing with saloons, assembly halls, and publishing houses. The city it presents feels utterly foreign from the corporatized and gentrified New York of today, but each of the anthology's eleven chapters adamantly resists any nostalgia. "Radical Gotham not only professes anarchism's distinctiveness," editor and contributor Tom Goyens maintains in his introduction, "but also demonstrates its *endurance* as a political and cultural ideology and movement in New York for nearly a century and half" (3, emphasis added). This anthology asserts anarchism's endurance as both an idea and a movement as it develops from working-class, immigrant anarchist communities in the late-nineteenth century into the New Left in the 1950s and 60s and finally the recent Occupy Wall Street protests.

What exactly is it that endures throughout these one hundred fifty years? Although anarchism is notoriously difficult to define, it can largely be characterized by the rejection of all power. Instead, anarchism abides by pre-figurative politics: the belief that "actions, methods, and organizations of revolutionaries should prefigure the kind of society that is desired" (6). In the words of New York Occupy, "Through consensual, non-hierarchical, and participatory self-governance, we are literally laying the framework for a new world by building it here and now—and it works" (17). This pre-figurative politics often defines itself against what it perceives as Marxism's more ends-oriented vision which, as anarchist theorist David Graeber argues, tries "to carve society into impossible shapes, killing millions in the process."¹ Pre-figurative politics is process-oriented instead of ends-oriented, focusing on the resistance itself instead of some abstract vision of a future utopian society. For Graeber, this focus on the journey rather than the destination is

crucial because “You will never achieve the ends at all unless the means are themselves a model for the world you wish to create.”²

This pre-figurative attempt to realize a better world in the here and now runs through every chapter of *Radical Gotham*. Space is a central preoccupation in this book, which describes in detail various anarchist struggles to carve out places of collective care and belonging in the capitalist landscape of New York. The first three chapters chronicle the earliest attempts to establish these spaces by working-class immigrants who transformed New York into an anarchist headquarters starting in the late-nineteenth century. Goyens’ first chapter introduces us to Johann Most. This man with “a scraggly beard” and “oratorical fire” came to New York in 1882 and went on to radicalize many other working-class immigrants, including Emma Goldman and Saul Yanovsky. While some immigrants such as Most brought their politics over with them, many became radicalized after they moved to the United States and witnessed the startling inconsistency between the promises of milk and honey and the realities of hardship and exploitation. Kenyon Zimmer’s chapter, “Saul Yanovsky and Yiddish Anarchism on the Lower East Side,” outlines this brilliantly through his account of the Yiddish-speaking, Jewish anarchists living in the Lower East-side at the beginning of the twentieth century. If they weren’t already radicalized by the pogroms or the perils of industrialization in Europe and Russia, many were when they faced the terrible labor conditions of the garment industry—where the majority of these Jewish immigrants found work. In response, they blended Yiddish culture and anarchist politics into a unique subculture that included mutual aid societies, Yiddish poetry presses, picnics, dinner parties, and Yom Kipper balls. In her chapter “Fired by the Ideal: Italian Anarchists in New York City, 1880s-1920s,” Marcella Bencivenni shows how Italian immigrants also blended their anarchist politics with their own distinct Italian culture. Their subculture not only included festivals, orchestras, and newspapers, but violent insurrection and armed resistance. The Italians were some of the most militant of the immigrant anarchist communities in New York, and Bencivenni opens her chapter with the 1920 Wall Street bombing, which killed dozens and wounded hundreds in what was the worst attack in New York City until September 11th.

The working-class and immigrant character of these anarchist communities changed drastically after World War I, immigration restrictions, and the rise of the Red Scare. There was also increasing pressure on immigrant communities to reject radicalism for entrance into white American bourgeois respectability. We see the rise of a New Left in the 1960s, which was college educated and engaged in cultural critique and non-violence. But *Radical Gotham* does an excellent job contesting popular conceptions of a radical break in anarchist history by documenting how these later movements were profoundly influenced by the practices and theories of their early immigrant comrades.

These later movements remain committed to carving out autonomous spaces, including: the Living Theatre’s attempts in the 1950s to alienate their audience from the existing social order and inspire them with a new way of living based on communal life and inner-transformation; the Motherfuckers countercultural affinity that strove to “survive, grow freaky, breathe, expand, love, struggle, and turn on” (167); Gordon Matta-Clarke’s anarchitecture’s confrontational critique of private property and the destruction of the commons as well as its creation of more egalitarian architecture; ABC No Rio’s do-it-yourself center of music, art making, and queer life; and, finally, Occupy Wall Street’s encampments in Zuccotti Park, which inspired hundreds of similar occupations around the world.

Although many of these movements have shut down as a result of the city’s intensifying privatization, gentrification, and police presence, Goyens is adamant in asserting that they are not failures: “Anarchism is and has been a distinct, resilient, transnational, and

significant political philosophy and movement that deserves to be studied on its own turf” (20). This claim is directed not only at liberals but also Marxists whose philosophy about the creation of power through an anarchist state or party is the principal target of the book. Marxism certainly has much to learn from anarchism’s attention to daily issues and its understanding of living space and culture as not secondary but central to an emancipatory project. But this book could learn from Marxism’s more dialectical account of the relationship between spaces of freedom and domination. As David Harvey points out in his essay “Listen, Anarchist!” “The myth here is that there is some sort of absolute freedom that exists outside of some mechanisms of exclusion and even, sorry to say, domination. The dialectic of freedom and domination cannot be so easily set aside in human affairs.”³ As exemplified by Occupy Wall Street’s brutal eviction from Zuccotti Park at the hands of the NYPD, anarchist spaces are not autonomous from the dominant order but always in relation to it. To ignore this reality, as Occupy did when it refused to engage with the state, is to sentence these anarchist spaces to endless evanescence.

Notes

1. David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2004), 10. [↗](#)
2. David Graeber, “Occupy Wall Street’s Anarchist Roots,” *Al Jazeera*, November 30, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/11/2011112872835904508.html>. [↗](#)
3. David Harvey, “Listen, Anarchist!” June 10, 2015, <http://davidharvey.org/2015/06/listen-anarchist-by-david-harvey>. [↗](#)

[Bio](#)

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Sofia Cutler is a recent graduate of McGill’s master’s program in cultural studies. Her work has been published in *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Briarpatch*, *3:AM Magazine*, and elsewhere. She has also curated an exhibition about the Montreal garment industry at the Museum of Jewish Montreal, which is set to open this spring. Her current work centers around urbanism in the United States and Brazil.



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